

Friday, October 4, 2002

Insurer, Firms Reach Deal

By Wren Propp

Journal Staff Writer

A deal brokered Thursday will allow Santa Feans covered by a large health care plan to receive mammograms and other radiology services from two local companies.

Santa Fe Imaging and Santa Fe Radiology agreed Thursday to a long-term contract with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Mexico, which covers a large number of public employees in Santa Fe.

Neither the rates of compensation nor the length of the contract was disclosed following a meeting arranged by the Public Regulation Commission's Department of Insurance.

"One down, one to go," said Joe Ruiz, deputy superintendent of the department.

He was referring to what he expects will be a similar meeting with Presbyterian Health Plan representatives and the representatives of the two companies. Presbyterian announced earlier this week that it plans to end listing the two companies as providers Nov. 1.

BCBSNM had announced last month that it planned to drop the Santa Fe companies from its providers' list because compensation negotiations had stalled.

As the only providers of mammography services in Santa Fe, BCBSNM users here would have had to travel to Albuquerque, Los Alamos or Española to receive services covered by BCBSNM.

Dr. William Litzenberg, a physician who spoke for the companies Thursday, said the companies had received several calls requesting that the companies' services remain available to BCBSNM users.

"They want to receive their services here," he said.

Users calling BCBSNM this week about the issue were concerned about escalating health care costs, said spokeswoman Lydia Ashanin.

None of the parties involved in Thursday's negotiations would say whether the Santa Fe companies would get more money for services from BCBSNM users as a result of the agreement.

"We reached a fair agreement," Ashanin said.

Talks ended weeks ago between the Santa Fe companies and BCBSNM over an affordable compensation rate, Ashanin has said.

But just how much the agreement will cost users is likely to come out eventually, said Tom Rabourn, director of the Risk Management Division, which is part of the General Services Department.

"They told us (Thursday) that they got a good deal ... And they're supposed to send us information" because any increased cost is paid by BCBSNM users, he said.

Rabourn wants to prevent health care costs from skyrocketing for state employees — under "self-insured" plans with the state — because of the lack of substantive pay raises this year.

"We don't want cost increases because it comes out of their pocket," he said.

During negotiations with the Santa Fe companies and Presbyterian several weeks ago, the companies had asked for a 26.6 percent increase in compensation for services, Rabourn said earlier this week.

St. Vincent Hospital, which owns 50 percent of Santa Fe Imaging, also was involved in the agreement process Thursday, said hospital spokeswoman Lara Nieto.

"The agreement that was reached this afternoon is important to the health of our community," she said Thursday.

Rep. Luciano "Lucky" Varela, D-Santa Fe, who pushed this week to get the parties back together, had said he was concerned that BCBSNM users in Santa Fe would have suffered severe health consequences. Varela is running for re-election in the House District 48 race. His opponent, Green Party member Rick Lass, said Friday he was relieved that the deal had been made, but he supports universal health care for all New Mexicans.

"With universal health care, this would not have happened in the first place," Lass said.